

Selecting a Consulting Forester

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A consulting forester is an independent forester whose services are available solely to private landowners. Consultants help develop management strategies that are environmentally friendly and fit the goals and objectives of the landowner. Because they are extremely knowledgeable about the intricacies of the forest industry, consultants may increase revenues returned to the forest landowner by as much as 25 percent, while at the same time cultivating a healthier, more productive timber stand.

The forest industry and timber dealers often have foresters who may provide services to landowners for little or no direct charge, but their own agenda and objectives may make it more difficult for them to objectively advise forest landowners and develop management strategies specific to the landowners' goals and objectives. Unless the forest landowner is very knowledgeable and experienced, it is better to enlist the services of a consulting forester. However, forest landowners should pick their consultants carefully, because as in any profession, they are not equally skilled. Furthermore, Texas has no registration or licensing process for consulting foresters—anyone can claim to be a forester. Landowners should use the checklist below when searching for a consultant. Don't be afraid to ask pointed questions before entering into a contract:

- ◆ Has the forester earned a bachelor's or higher degree from an accredited college or university? A list of accredited colleges and universities can be found at <http://safnet.org>.
- ◆ How many years of actual forest management experience does the forester have and in what capacity?
- ◆ In what professional or forestry-related organizations is the forester an active member? Recognized professional organizations include the Association of Consulting Foresters of America, Texas Forestry Association, Society of American Foresters, and the American Tree Farm System (Certified Tree Farm Inspector).
- ◆ Is the forester familiar with local, state and federal regulations that affect silvicultural practices? Is he or she able to demonstrate knowledge of county road use permits or bonds; regulations of the Texas Com-

mission on Environmental Quality; bill-of-sale law; and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency regulations involving endangered species, wetlands and water quality?

- ◆ Is the forester familiar with local and state property tax laws such as the Texas Reforestation Act?
- ◆ Is the forester familiar with timber markets in the area? He or she should know the number of pine and hardwood pulpwood and saw mills, independent contractors, and wood yards.
- ◆ Can the forester recognize boundary, title, income tax and access problems and recommend other professionals to help in areas he or she is not qualified to address, such as timber tax forms and exemptions specific to forestry?
- ◆ Can the forester provide references from landowners with whom he has worked and will he or she allow you to view examples of previous work?
- ◆ Does the forester agree with your management plan and the long-term goals for your property?
- ◆ If you have no forest management plan, will he or she prepare one?
- ◆ Does the forester have good working relationships with the timber industry and familiarity with the SFI certification requirements?
- ◆ How far from the property does the forester live? If the consultant lives too far away, it will be difficult to visit on a regular basis.
- ◆ Will the forester provide a contract for services that outlines what is expected from both parties and what the cost will be for the forester's professional services?

- ◆ Does the forester have an adequate staff of other professionals to help with management and service?
- ◆ Will the forester be available for subsequent silvicultural operations, or do you get the feeling that this may be a "one-time" job?
- ◆ Is the forester a good communicator, both orally and in written correspondence?
- ◆ Do you like this person?

Although a negative response to any of these questions would not necessarily mean the forester is not an honest, competent individual, it could mean that the landowner should review the consultant's other qualifications more closely.

Once you select a forester, you must know your needs and wishes and be able to communicate them clearly to your consultant. Level with him or her, but be realistic when it comes to your expectations. It will likely take more resources and time than you expect to reach your objectives, whether it's a crop of trees or an aesthetic view. Unreasonable expectation on the part of the landowner can result in expensive lessons. One of the best ways to learn what you can reasonably expect from a piece of land is to attend educational programs such as those conducted by Texas Cooperative Extension and the Texas Forest Service.

Produced by Agricultural Communications, The Texas A&M University System
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Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension Work in Agriculture and Home Economics, Acts of Congress of May 8, 1914, as amended, and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture. Edward G. Smith, Director, Texas Cooperative Extension, The Texas A&M University System.